

Dear Members of the Human Services Committee of Connecticut General Assembly:

My name is Hye Young Choi and I am a first year medical student at Yale School of Medicine and a public health researcher. I am also an undocumented immigrant who can speak to the pains and risks of marginalization, as well as the hope and potential that can arise from policies like HB 6616: An Act Concerning Expansion Of Husky Health Benefits To Those Ineligible Due To Immigration Status. I care about HUSKY for immigrants because I wish others had supported my right to be mentally and physically healthy when I was a teenager and young adult. I care about HUSKY for immigrants because undocumented immigrants contribute hundreds of millions of dollars in federal and state taxes every year, yet are unjustly barred from accessing health care. I care about HUSKY for immigrants because it is the right thing to do and I believe in Connecticut's potential to work towards justice and build caring, robust communities. I hope that after hearing our stories, you will care too.

My family moved to the US from South Korea in 2001 due to financial hardship in our home country. Since moving here, my parents have worked in a factory and various restaurants to earn minimum wage without any benefits. Not unlike many other undocumented immigrants, they suffered numerous injuries in the workplace from accidents and overuse, but had no recourse due to their lack of legal status and health insurance. While growing up, I never saw my parents seek health care, only massaged them when they were bedridden and changed their bandages over burns and cuts. I cannot describe to you how helpless I felt when my dad's car flipped over twice across a rainy freeway during his commute and he refused to go to the emergency room.

Without insurance, we have also allowed small problems to grow larger. The constant alienation and fear of deportation that started out as mild stress for my sister and I later consumed us with severe depression and anxiety into our adulthood. For over a decade, my mother indiscriminately took Tylenol for her daily headaches, not realizing she had severe hypertension. Hepatitis B quietly ravaged my dad's body for years until he developed lesions throughout his liver.

As a public health researcher, I study the health of undocumented communities and the social and political factors that harm or help their health. In my research sample of nearly 400 undocumented youth, 70-80% meet clinical criteria for depression. In addition, many are unable to access basic primary care services and thus cannot initiate or complete important vaccine series, screenings, and counseling services. My personal experiences and research findings suggest that exclusionary policies are making people sicker.

Having access to health insurance would help undocumented families and individuals live happier and healthier lives. It would also send a message that undocumented people are worthy of basic human rights and valued in the community that they enrich and contribute to. If I were a legislator with power, I would tell my younger self that it is okay to seek help when you are hurting; that you should not have to watch your parents and sister suffer; and that you belong and deserve to live to your full potential. My hope is that undocumented children and young adults hear these messages through HB 6616 and Connecticut can grow one step closer to reducing preventable health disparities and providing healthcare for all.

I support HB 6616 and I ask the committee to support and pass this legislation. Looking forward, I ask the committee to work towards opening access to all immigrants regardless of age.

Thank you for your time,
Hye Young Choi, MPH

